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# **EMERCOM: Russia's Emergency Response Team**

by Mr. Timothy L. Thomas  
Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS.

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One of Russia's highest priorities is the establishment of an environment in which political, economic and other democratic reforms can progress. An important task associated with this requirement is dealing effectively with natural and man-made disasters.

This is a very difficult task in today's Russia as the frequency of accidents continues to rise. During the first half of 1994, Russia recorded 747 disasters, which is up from the 565 recorded in 1993. Over 20,000 people were affected and 1178 died. Also demonstrating an upward spiral in the past year were the number of natural disasters in Russia (from 112 to 182), the number of environmental emergencies (from 0 to 10), toxin spills and radiological emergencies (from 30 to 43), the number of man-made emergencies (from 453 to 564), and, most significantly, the number of nuclear plant emergencies (from one to six).<sup>1</sup>

To better address the consequences of these events, President Yeltsin created a new Russian Ministry called the Russian Federation's Ministry of Civil Defense, Emergencies and the Elimination of the Consequences of Natural Disasters (EMERCOM). Established on 10 January 1994 by Presidential Decree, it is also called the Ministry for Extraordinary Situations. Some consider the real birth of the agency as 27 December 1990 when the Russian Rescue Corps was established and assigned the mission of rapid response in the case of emergencies.

This article outlines the missions and functions of the Ministry. It underscores the importance of the agency's role in managing catastrophic situations in Russia caused by either neglect on the part of man, uncontrollable acts of nature, or the consequences of accidents. The latter resulted from the poor construction of nuclear, biological, or chemical facilities, the failure of machines, or the establishment of inadequate safety procedures.

Without a doubt, the Ministry is playing a vital role in containing emergency situations that potentially could affect the lives of people both within and outside the borders of Russia. As the Chernobyl accident demonstrated nearly ten years ago, we live in a compressed world in which events on one side of the globe can affect those on the other in a matter of minutes. When time is of the essence, it is vital to have an organization like EMERCOM to help.

## **The Mission, Role, and Organization of EMERCOM**

EMERCOM is located on the Ring Road in Moscow between Detski Mir (Children's World) and the Bolshoi Theater. Office space is limited, although this fact is somewhat offset by the Ministry's central location which aids in coordination. In June of 1995 the Ministry's display window offered a pictorial tribute that respectfully recognized both the heroes and victims of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. The display included the dismaying figures that, to date, 35,000 people have died (including 1000 children), and over 800,000 people are still sick from the accident. The small exhibit provided a startling reminder of the consequences of a single mistake and the crucial role of the Ministry in containing the repercussions of future problems.

According to an EMERCOM publication, the Ministry is an agency of Federal Executive Power with the following tasks:

- developing proposals and initiatives in the sphere of State policy on issues within the Ministry's competence;
- managing Civil Defense and Search and Rescue Service in the Russian Federation;
- providing for the functioning and further development of the Russian System of Disaster Management (RSDM);
- directing activities aimed at eliminating the consequences of large-scale disasters, catastrophes and other emergencies;
- conducting special submarine activities;
- supervising the use of finance resources allocated to the Government for disaster management and response;
- organizing the training of the population, and governing agencies and the RSDM forces for disaster management and response;
- and organizing international cooperation in the fields of the Ministry's competency.<sup>2</sup>

EMERCOM is subdivided into several departments. These include the Department for Protection of the Population and Territories; the Department for Disaster Prevention; the Department of Forces; the Department for International Cooperation; the Department for the Elimination of Consequences of Radiological and other Disasters; the Department for Science and Technology; and the Management Department. EMERCOM also contains several specialized commissions and boards to coordinate and implement certain tasks. These include: the Interagency Commission of the Russian Federation for Fighting Forest Fires; the Interagency Commission of the Russian Federation for Floods; the Interagency Maritime Coordinating Commission for Emergencies on the Seas and Water Basins; and the Interagency Commission of the Russian Federation for the Certification of Rescuers.<sup>3</sup> Working through the office of the Prime Minister, the Ministry can ask for private or Ministry of Defense or Internal Forces assistance. That is, the Ministry has international coordination power and the ability to tap local resources if required.

The Department of International Cooperation, to present an example of the activities of one of these departments and commissions, has already signed agreements on cooperation during disaster response and prevention with Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, Poland, Belorussia, Georgia, and Kazakhstan. Mutual assistance pacts are ready for signing with Mongolia, Latvia,

Finland, Armenia, Moldova, and Estonia. An agreement also exists with the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and agreements are sought with the OSCE and NATO.

The Ministry has several internal establishments and organizations of its own. Some of the most important include the following:

**Regional Centers.** EMERCOM centers are located in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-the-Don, Samara, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, Chita and Khabarovsk.

**Civil Defense and Emergency Headquarters.** Many regions, provinces, autonomous administrative units, districts and towns possess these headquarters.

**Command and Control Center.** These centers are located in Moscow, and in each region and oblast.

**Training and Education Facilities.** These include a Civil Protection Academy, Training and Methodology Centers, an All-Russia Scientific Research Institute, an All-Russian Monitoring and Laboratory Control Center, and a Center for Scientific Analysis of Civil Defense Issues.

To perform rapid response operations the following forces and equipment:

**Central Air-Mobile Rescue Team.** These teams are equipped with aviation facilities that include helicopters and cargo aircraft (Iliushin-76 and Antonov-74). The teams have taken part in United Nation's humanitarian delivery operations.

**Civil Defense Troops.** These troops consist of military troop divisions and regiments stationed in various regions of the country.

**Search and Rescue Service.** This service maintains 30 units in various republics, regions and provinces. <sup>4</sup>

## **Overview of EMERCOM's Role, Equipment and Use.**

EMERCOM's missions correspond closely to the missions of the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and many of the disaster relief/assistance missions of the U.S. National Guard. Cooperation with the U.S. is increasing. Last August, EMERCOM Minister Sergey Shoigu met with United States Ambassador Thomas Pickering to discuss cooperation between the two countries in the area of disaster prevention and resolution. Their talks expanded on a June 1994 agreement on the founding of a Russian-American joint committee for cooperation in preventing industrial accidents and natural disasters. Further, NATO's Partnership for Peace program is sponsoring the establishment of direct ties between EMERCOM's regional centers and the U.S. National Guard's Emergency Planning Services. Pickering and Shoigu also discussed preparations for U.S. participation in an international rescuer's exercise held in September. Pickering also thanked Shoigu for offering a plane to help the U.S. combat fires in the western part of the U.S., and expressed future interest in cooperating with Russia in relief efforts in countries which lack national systems to plan for and prevent disasters, or to control them once they occur. <sup>5</sup>

EMERCOM considers itself as one of the five Russian "power" ministries (the others being Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Counterintelligence Service, and the External Intelligence Service). The Ministry deploys teams outside the territory of Russia on occasion, but for the most part focuses its efforts within the confines of the Russian border. Its troops are

armed only with small arms for self-protection and have no heavy weapons. The Ministry has no wartime role, only peacetime, and does not consider itself to have a political agenda or has no aspirations to align with a political organization.<sup>6</sup> EMERCOM helps everyone without concern for religion or nationality. In the Russian internal struggle for Chechnya, EMERCOM reported that the Chechens have not bothered their convoys and are accepted all aid delivered by the Ministry.

EMERCOM divides Russia into nine regions, supporting 89 oblasts. Each oblast's EMERCOM headquarters has 5 or 6 people. The headquarters are usually found in towns where a chemical industry is located or where a risk of an emergency situation could arise. It performs a great variety of search and rescue missions. The central air mobile rescue team, for example, is composed of nearly 200 rescuers and is on 24 hour duty. Each rescuer is medically trained. The rescue team is deployed almost constantly.

EMERCOM equipment stock acquisitions demonstrate the necessity of maintaining a wide range of material that will ensure mission flexibility. Much of the Ministry's equipment is bought abroad. Some equipment has dual capabilities. For example, IL-76s can change from a humanitarian aid mission to a fire fighting mission in just over 2 hours. EMERCOM maintains aviation, engineer, communications, transport, nuclear, biological, and chemical protection, and rear services equipment of various types. EMERCOM personnel are formed in companies, battalions, regiments, and brigades, and total nearly 23,000 troops.<sup>7</sup> The creation of mobile rapid-reaction units is underway (one report cited 30 such mobile teams) and servicemen are switching to a contract basis of service.<sup>8</sup>

When the Soviet Union broke apart, the complete Civil Defense apparatus was transferred to EMERCOM except for the underground bunker system of command and control, which the Ministry of Defense kept for its own use.<sup>9</sup> With this experienced apparatus integrated into its structure, EMERCOM began responding to emergencies from the first days of its creation. Its learning curve was much shorter than expected due to this development. In addition to the 23,000 servicemen who came over from the old Civil Defense apparatus (and who maintained their rank and years in service), 16,000 civilians are also employed by the Ministry.<sup>10</sup> It has its own press service responsible for monitoring the public image of the Ministry. A TV set in the press center is constantly turned on to evaluate reporting from an accident site.

The operations center is relatively small, but efficient. It has a small library that maintains important EMERCOM related facilities and coordinating agencies in each region. Each desk or cubicle area has two or three telephones and a computer link. Responsibilities are listed on the outside of each cubicle, ranging from natural disasters (such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, drought, and freezing conditions) to chemical and electrical industry emergencies, among others. In addition to responding to emergencies, Minister Shoigu lists long-range forecasting as another of his office's most important priorities.

The center was able to coordinate a quick response (first flights out of Moscow were 12 hours after initial notification) to the recent earthquake in Sakhalin.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the latter disaster, EMERCOM relied heavily on lessons learned from mock exercises they held in Sakhalin only a month before the earthquake (there were indicators that a quake was imminent and a training

exercise was planned and conducted <sup>12</sup>, demonstrating the effectiveness of the forecasting office noted above), and on experience gained from the Japanese experience with the Kobes earthquake. For example, EMERCOM instituted the procedure of eight hour shifts for the workers that included an initial hour of silence when workers listened for cries of help from buried survivors. Then, during the next seven hours of the shift, the workers tried to mark these areas and free the victims. Both local and international opinion of the rescue effort is positive, especially when compared to the confusion that surrounded the last earthquake rescue effort nearly eight years ago in Armenia.

EMERCOM units conduct exercises much like the armed forces. For example, last year they held a command and staff exercise on the territory of Kabardino-Balkaria to practice interaction in case natural or man-made disasters arise.<sup>13</sup> It is rumored that at one time EMERCOM wanted a role as a peacekeeping unit in place of regular army units, but has since abandoned that idea. Minister of Defense Grachev was adamantly opposed to the idea, stating that EMERCOM had no combat weapons at its disposal. He added that whenever EMERCOM wished to carry out missions that it rented ships, aviation and armored vehicles from the armed forces.<sup>14</sup>

A quick review of EMERCOM's activities during 1994 demonstrates the wide range of Ministry capabilities for responding to local catastrophes both within and outside of Russia. They handled aircraft accidents in Irkutsk and Mezhdurechensk, evacuated Russian citizens from the Republic of Yemen, delivered humanitarian aide to Rwandan refugees' camps in Tanzania and Zaire, organized an expedition to the Sea of Norway where the Komsomolets nuclear submarine catastrophe occurred (here a special mini sub known as the "sub aquatic helicopter" was utilized to carry out radiological monitoring of the disaster site), responded to explosions caused by gas-spills in Leninsk and Kazakhstan, and performed search and rescue operations in Bashkortostan when a dam burst as a result of heavy rains. The Ministry continues to deliver humanitarian aide to the population of the former Yugoslavia, an operation Russia began in 1993.

In Yugoslavia, EMERCOM set up two truck fleets to deliver aide to the people of the region. These fleets started working in February 1993, and by May a second fleet was operating. Nearly 30 trucks are now in service there. The fleets include 66 drivers, four team leaders, six coordinators, eight mechanics and four physicians. These personnel are paid by the U.N., and spare parts are delivered from Moscow. One of the fleets was formed in the town of Noginsk, the other in Zhukovsky. Many of the drivers have experience from EMERCOM's missions in Ossetia, Georgia, and Abkhazia. Each shift of the truck fleet works from two to three months under contract with the UNHCR. Each convoy of aide delivers nearly 90 metric tons of foodstuffs, medicine, and clothing. EMERCOM's performance was so commendable that on 24 November 1993 an agreement was signed with the UNHCR allowing EMERCOM's transport means to be used in humanitarian operations all over the globe.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Minister of EMERCOM**

The Minister in charge of EMERCOM is Sergey Kozhugetovich Shoigu. He was appointed by President Yeltsin in November 1991 as Chairman of the State Committee of the Russian Federation for Civil Defense Matters, Extraordinary Situations and Liquidation of Natural Disasters. Shoigu was given the rank of General Major in October 1994, and his committee

became a ministry in January 1994. President Yeltsin showed his faith in the importance of EMERCOM by designating Minister Shoigu a member of the Russian Security Council by Presidential Decree on 1 February 1994.<sup>16</sup>

Minister Shoigu is only 41. He has never served in a military unit but works closely with the Ministry of Defense. However, tension remains over missions between the two ministries. Peacekeeping is not the only place where there has been a confrontation. Russia's Defense Ministry also has a Search and Rescue Administration similar to Shoigu's search and rescue team. The two ministries have squabbled over this and other areas regarding missions and defense budget money.

Shoigu is from the province of Krasnoyarsk. He was a relative unknown who entered government service in 1990 precisely at a time when authorities were gambling on young and promising people who had not previously served in important positions. As a construction engineer he had helped build the Achinsk oil refinery and aluminium oxide combine, and the Sayansk aluminium plant. Later he moved to party work, first as the second secretary of the Abakan City Party Committee and then as a member of the Krasnoyarsk Kray Party Committee. Next, he began to study at the Social Sciences Academy and therefore avoided becoming caught up in the problems of the country in 1991. After completing his studies, he became the deputy chairman of the State Committee for Construction, and then the head of the Russian corps of rescue workers. From this job evolved his current position as a minister.

While Shoigu's Ministry handles natural disasters as a primary responsibility, he has handled some peace operation missions in hot spots. His Ministry's functions here include taking peaceful citizens out of conflict zones or, if they are blockaded, to provide them help with food products, medicines, and clothing. Shoigu noted, for example, that in Chechnya the ministry had delivered 323.7 tons of humanitarian assistance to Mozdok by air; 550 tons of sugar, salt, tea, soap, etc. by rail; and that 5% of his total force was involved in missions in Chechnya.<sup>17</sup> The ministry is far from being "problem free." A major concern remains local authorities' use of money destined for humanitarian aid. For example, the Sakhalin Oblast purchased two landing vessels with the more than one million dollars sent as humanitarian aid for the population of the Kuriles, who suffered from the earthquake.<sup>18</sup> Even Minister Shoigu has received severe criticism for certain actions. For example, Shoigu allegedly attempted to infuse "general's stars" into his organization last year when he requested the following list for his Ministry: one general of the army (for himself), nine colonel generals, 83 lieutenant generals, 76 major generals, and four rear admiral slots. Reportedly his request was turned down.<sup>19</sup>

Shoigu does not consider his Ministry's work as a place for heroism. They help people professionally, and Shoigu himself is on the road nearly two-thirds of the year. In recent months, Shoigu's image has risen based on his Ministry's performance in Chechnya and Sakhalin, among other emergencies (forest fires, etc.). He has shown that he can do a good job and this positive image may enable him to remain in the Ministry after the next election, even if President Yeltsin is not reelected.

## **Conclusions**



The Civil Defense organization of Russia has undergone a significant transformation from an agency almost totally controlled by the military to an independent ministry. While the term "civil defense" is sometimes encountered in the press, it is believed that the reference is to the forces of EMERCOM. It appears that two factors, the successful transformation and the number of disasters that have cropped up recently, have led to an increase in the ministry's overall strength, and supported its image as an apolitical organization capable of containing the natural or man-made disasters that confront Russia monthly without religious, ethnic, or regional prejudice.

Minister Shoigu has helped with the improvement of this image through his diligence and hands on approach to the job. Like many of the members of his organization, he is quick to arrive at the scene of an accident. He has also learned much from his interaction with counterpart foreign agencies. In fact, the opposite is now true, as many foreign officials are turning their attention to Shoigu's ministry as representative of some of the most experienced people in the disaster field.

The operations center in Moscow has proven that it can quickly react and redirect forces to assist in disaster relief operations all over the country. The ministry relies on close interaction with the international community and disaster relief equipment firms to maintain its readiness posture and high tech approach to containing and eliminating the consequences of all types of accidents, whether man-made or natural. The ministry is off to a good start and is proving to be one of the few stable and reliable elements of relief for the country. Do not expect EMERCOM to grab headlines or make waves in either the near or distant future. Expect it to quietly and efficiently do a professional job in the areas of disaster management and humanitarian aide.

## ENDNOTES

1. "EMERCOM of Russia," publication of the Ministry of Extraordinary Situations, p 13. For another good list of statistics on accidents before 1994, see Andrey Bayduzhiy, "The Time of Catastrophes Has Come in Russia, Rise in Accident Rate Taking on Unprecedented Proportions," Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 30 July 1994, pp 1,3. [BACK](#)

2. Ibid., EMERCOM document, pp 1, 2. [BACK](#)

3. Ibid., EMERCOM document, p 2. [BACK](#)

4. Ibid., EMERCOM document, pp 3,4. [BACK](#)

5. ITAR-TASS, 1502 GMT 5 August 1994, as reported in FBIS-SOV-94-152, 5 August 1994. [BACK](#)

6. Based on a conversation with an EMERCOM official in March 1995. [BACK](#)

7. Kirillov, Andrey, "SOS Team Always Ready for Anything," Rossiyskaya Gazeta, 19 August 1994 p 5. [BACK](#)

8. Ibid., Kirillov. [BACK](#)

9. Discussion with EMERCOM officials in Moscow in June 1995. [BACK](#)
10. Based on discussions with EMERCOM personnel in Moscow in June 1995. [BACK](#)
11. Based on a visit by the author to the operations center in June 1995. [BACK](#)
12. Oleg Kryuchek, "Victor Chernomyrdin Runs Exercises on Kamchatke from Moscow (Viktor Chernomyrdin prurukovodit ucheniyami na Kamchatke iz Moskvyy)," Sevodnya 22 April 1995, page unknown. [BACK](#)
13. "Emergency Minister Holds Exercises in Nalchik," Segodnya, 12 May 1994 p 3. [BACK](#)
14. INTERFAX, 1725 GMT 23 March 1994. [BACK](#)
15. Information from discussions at EMERCOM headquarters and from the EMERCOM pamphlet "Russian Humanitarian Convoy." [BACK](#)
16. ITAR-TASS news release, 1041 GMT 1 February 1994. [BACK](#)
17. Vladimir Berezko, "Emergency Situations Minister: Assistance Must Reach," Krasnaya Zvezda, 22 December 1994, p 3. [BACK](#)
18. "What Problem Today Can Be Called the Most Acute for Your Department and What Solution Do You See To It?", Sluzhba, 20 December 1994, p 2, as translated in JPRS-UMA-95-003, 31 January 1995, p 2, 3. [BACK](#)
19. Aleksandr Nikolayev, "Under the Carpet," Obshchaya Gazeta, No. 38/63, 23-29 September 1994, p 8. [BACK](#)